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GATEWAY TO THE SEA: 350 YEARS OF THE BOSTON HARBOR

A Jubilee 350 Exhibit at City Hall Gallery

June, 1980

William Avery Baker, Curator

Boston Harbor today is the scene of rehabilitated granite warehouses, new luxury apartments, the New England Aquarium, offices and boutiques, the U.S.S. Constitution and the Constitution Museum, and the beautiful Water-front Park. It is also a center for maritime commerce, boating, recreation, and food, just as it has been for 350 years. To celebrate the sea as a source of bounty and beauty, Jubilee 350 has designated June 1980 as Boston Harbor Month. To rivet our attention and set our imaginations soaring, the breathtaking Tall Ships will sail once again into Boston Harbor on May 30, 1980, recalling an era when Boston was the nation's first hub of a thriving shipbuilding, trading and fishing industry.

With Boston Harbor and its craft as backdrop, Bostonians and visitors alike can step back in time as they view the photographs and artifacts of Boston's ships and harbor at the GATEWAY TO THE SEA exhibit in City Hall Gallery. The exhibit and its catalogue will trace Boston's historic ties to the sea from the outstanding maritime collections of the SPNEA, the Bostonian Society, the Boston Atheneum, and the Boston Public Library.

In 1630, a stream of immigrants poured into Boston Harbor to found a new city and develop a new land. Over the years, Boston Harbor and its inter-connecting bays provided a highway between villages, colonies, and nations. Trading, fishing, boat and ship building grew together, as Boston's ship-masters touched every port in the Atlantic world to establish a tradition for skillful trading that was the basis of the city's maritime success for over 200 years.

The signal light that gave Beacon Hill its name was established in 1635 to guide ships safely home to Boston from all over the world. For years, Boston's trading pattern was triangular and included cargoes of fish, lumber, rum, and salt to the West Indies. There, bills of exchange, gold and silver, and tropical products were obtained for purchasing manufactured goods in England to bring home. By 1775, Boston's trading changed. Cargoes from ports in the Canary Islands, on the Iberian Peninsula, and around the Mediterranean came to account for three-fifths of the European products while trading in the West Indies spread to include Dutch, French, and Spanish possessions.

From the simple town dock of 1630, Bendall's Cove, where now are located Faneuil and Quincy Markets, there were 78 wharves along the Boston and Charles-town waterfronts by 1708. The year 1710 saw the construction of the great Long Wharf alongside which even a hundred years later the largest ships could be unloaded. On September 14, 1716 Boston's first lighthouse on Great Brewster Island was lighted, although there had been some sort of a beacon on Point Allerton as early as 1673.





The Molasses Act of 1733 gave smuggling a respectable status in Boston. The Stamp Act of 1765 and the new Townshend import duties in 1767 stirred resentment and organized resistance among the city's merchants, all leading to the Tea Party on December 16, 1773. The Boston Port Bill effective on June 1, 1774 closed the harbor and commerce by sea was halted. There followed the War for Independence during which 365 vessels were commissioned for privateering; the Massachusetts State and Continental Navies were active out of the port. The war was won, but commerce had been destroyed and many years passed before it was in sound balance again.

In 1783 the double change from war to peace and from colony to independence plagued the entire new nation. Boston entered the worst business depression yet known, but by 1789 its commerce entered a period of vigorous expansion. In addition to the Baltic and Mediterranean trades, Boston had almost a private one with China via the Northwest Coast of North America. Boston's ships were caught, however, in the conflicts between England and France, and ultimately the War of 1812.

Shipping boomed for a few years following the end of the war in 1815. In 1818 Boston owned the greatest tonnage in proportion to population of any United States port. This meant more than just cargoes for the merchants, for the ships brought work for the waterfront workers -- shipwrights, sparmakers, riggers, sailmakers, and ropemakers. The decade 1820-1830 saw a steady growth in overseas and coastal shipping, but beginning about 1830 the percentage of goods carried in American ships started dropping.

Steam came to Boston harbor in 1817 when the steamboat Massachusetts operated without much success between Boston and Salem. She was followed by the Eagle in 1818 which served on various local runs until 1824. Steamboat lines operated within the harbor into the 1960's -- diesel propelled craft are still in service -- but only until 1941 on coastwise runs to Nova Scotia, Maine, and New York. Coastwise steamship services to Philadelphia, Chesapeake Bay ports and Savannah terminated at the outbreak of World War II.

As ships grew in size during the nineteenth century, the shipyards in Boston proper on Shawmut peninsula, gave way to those in East and South Boston. Since 1631 yards at Medford on the Mystic River had supplied ships for Boston owners; there were other yards at Charlestown, Chelsea, and the towns on the inner bays to the south. During the 1840's, faster ships were built for the packet services and the China trade.

With the discovery of gold in California in 1848 came the demand for speed at any cost and the clipper ship era was born. The decline in clipper ship construction was apparent in 1854, and the era ended in 1860. Of the acknowledged American clippers, 20 percent were built in Boston, East Boston, and South Boston, and 17½ percent more in the towns around the harbor. Boston built clippers, like Donald McKay's Flying Cloud of 1851, hold the records for west and east bound passages.





During the Civil War, Boston's extensive trade, particularly that with the southern states, was disrupted. At least 13 Boston ships were destroyed by Confederate commerce raiders whose activities forced the sale of many United States merchant vessels to foreign countries. Unlike earlier wars, there were no privateersmen nor any Boston-based warships to bring glory to the port. The Navy Yard in Charlestown, however, and private contractors around the harbor were turning out wooden and iron hulls along with steam machinery for the Union Navy.

The three decades following the Civil War saw the construction of the last American wooden square-rigged ships, the "Down-Easters" so-called because most were built in Maine; several came from East Boston yards, but few were based in Boston. Much of the city's commerce was taken over by foreign-owned steamship lines; the first such had been the Cunard Line whose Unicorn arrived in Boston in 1840. A network of domestic steamer lines connected Boston with other Atlantic Coast ports, and the demand for fuel for them and the growing industries in New England brought fleets of coal-carrying, multi-masted schooners into port. Within the harbor there were built after the Civil War at least 58 three-masted schooners, 9 four-masted, and 1 five-masted of wood, and 1 six-masted and the only 7 master of steel at Quincy. Other important pre-World War I inbound cargoes were wood, hides and skins, coffee, and bananas.

During the early twentieth century through World War I many improvements were made to the port of Boston. Channels were dredged, aids to navigation added, mud flats filled, and new wharves built. These included the Broad Sound Channel, the Graves Lighthouses, Commonwealth Pier No. 5, and the Army Base with its huge drydock.

After World War I, the coal schooners gave way to steam propelled colliers which in turn have been displaced by huge tankers; liquefied natural gas is the newest energy cargo. Most dry cargoes are now shipped in containers which are handled at special facilities at Castle Island, now part of the mainland instead of a fort far out in the harbor, and on filled land in Charlestown. Part of the Charlestown Naval Shipyard is now a major section of the Boston National Historical Park, and other parts of the Navy Yard will contain a large Waterfront Park, a marina, and new housing in refurbished historic buildings. The South Boston Army Base is now the newly-created Boston Marine Industrial Park. It is still possible for travelers to reach Hingham and Hull by boat most of the year, and Nantasket Beach and Provincetown during the summer. The Boston Harbor Islands Commission is improving the many islands and increasing access to them, and many harbor cruises are now available in the summer from Long Wharf and Rowes Wharf.

The "sacred cod" had been declared the symbol of Massachusetts as early as 1636; fish was a major export commodity as well as a local food supply. By the mid-eighteenth century, although overshadowed by other ports, Boston's fishermen were exporting about 70,000 quintals of dried fish each year.

During the night, I saw several of the prisoners in the cell with me. They were all very tired and some of them were crying. The guard who was with me at the time said that the prisoners were very tired and some of them were crying. The guard who was with me at the time said that the prisoners were very tired and some of them were crying.

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About 120 vessels were employed in the fisheries each having a crew of about seven and each requiring three or four men on shore to dry the catch. These fishing vessels usually made five trips a year -- two to Sable Island, one to Brown's Bank, and two to St. George's Bank.

The size and activities of fishing vessels have varied according to economic and political conditions. By 1890 increased size resulted in a concentration of large schooners sailing from Boston. Steam trawlers were introduced in 1905, but they were replaced by diesel propelled vessels during the late 1920's. The sailing fishermen gave up about 1930. In the early 1920's, Boston was the fish marketing center of the western hemisphere, but lost this position to foreign vessels in New England waters and to other ports. Today, plans to restore and improve Boston's Fish Pier are underway, and fishing is once again a growing Boston industry.

For Boston's 350th birthday, it is especially significant to recognize Boston's important maritime history and contributions, and to focus today on the new and old uses of Boston's harbor and waterfront, and plans for its continued rejuvenation.

GATEWAY TO THE SEA: 350 YEARS OF THE BOSTON HARBOR will open at City Hall Gallery on May 30, 1980 and remain there until July 8th. The exhibit will then move to the new Museum of Transportation -- appropriately located on the waterfront -- at Congress Street Wharf for July and August 1980.



